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ABSTRACT

Audience and situational context, the latter defined as a pairing of time and place coordinates, have passed through stages of union, separation, and identification in the history of rhetoric. From Aristotle through Cicero and Quintilian to Hugh Blair and George Campbell, audience was a synecdoche for the situations of utterance that defined deliberative, forensic, and epideictic (in the classical period) or homiletic (in the eighteenth century) oratory. With the shift from oral to written texts as the object of rhetorical inquiry during the nineteenth century, this principle of classification became less viable, since situational context in its literal sense disappears for texts composed to be read. Moreover, the assumption of James Kinneavy's "Theory of Discourse" that all discourse possesses a situational context entails that situation cannot determine persuasive (sub)aim, as had historically been assumed. Consequently, Kinneavy separates audience (the "decoder") from situational context, making the former by itself constitutive of persuasive discourse. However, the notion of decoder cannot differentiate qualitatively along an axis of engagement in a rhetorical situation. To correct this deficiency, recent work has reunited audience and situational context, indeed collapsed them, through metaphorical extensions such as audience evocation and displaced contexts of (genre) convention or discourse community. (Nine references are attached.) (Author/ARH)

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AUDIENCE AND SITUATIONAL CONTEXT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Audience and Situational Context in Historical Perspective

Mark S. LeTourneau

As the title of my paper indicates, I propose to examine the vicissitudes of the concept of audience in the history of rhetoric by tracing the evolution of the intertwined concept of situational context. For the purposes of this paper, I will define situational context (or context of situation or utterance, as it is also called) as an association of coordinates of time, place, and persons in which a rhetorical act takes place. The changes through which audience theory has passed are attributable in large measure to developments in rhetoricians' understanding of the role of situational context in constructing and classifying discourse. The relationship between audience and situational context divides into three stages: union, separation, and identification.

The Union of Audience and Situational Context

The stage of union extends from the classical period, ruled by the Greco-Roman triumvirate of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, through the late eighteenth century, when the British triumvirate of Blair, Campbell, and Whately laid the groundwork for the separation of audience and context of situation in the nineteenth century. Due to time limitations, I will omit any discussion of medieval or Renaissance rhetoric. Since the critical change occurred later, this is not a ruinous omission, but it should be kept in mind.

Despite important differences, classical and eighteenth century rhetoricians agreed that the audience for a speech was, in effect, a synecdoche for situations of utterance and that it

functioned as such as a principle of classification for various types of persuasive oratory. The locus classicus for this position is Aristotle's **Rhetoric**, 1.3.1, which is the first passage on your handout.

> The forms of rhetoric are three in number: for as many also are the hearers of speeches. For a speech is laid together of three [parts], of the one speaking and concerning what he says and toward whom, and **the goal [of the speech] is [directed] toward this one, I mean [say] the hearer.** For it is necessary for the hearer to be either a spectator or a judge, and a judge either of things having happened or things about to happen. The one [who hears] concerning the things about to happen is a member of a public assembly; the one [who hears] concerning the things having happened is a judge; the one [who hears] concerning the ability [of the speaker] is a spectator: so that from necessity there be three kinds of rhetorical speeches, political, judicial, and ceremonial.

The hearer of a speech determines its end and consequently its species, and the three classes of hearers are synecdochal of the three scenes in which speeches are made, namely, the political assembly, the court, and funerals or civic festivities.

Observe that the contexts of situation for political and judicial discourse can be defined more precisely than can that for ceremonial discourse. This may account for the fact that panagyric becomes marginalized in Roman rhetoric. Note the increasing generality of the kinds of questions motivating the

three kinds of speeches given by Crassus in Cicero's **De Oratore**: "But of causes, which are separate from a common question, some on judicial [questions] turn, some on deliberations; there is also a third kind, which in praising or vituperating is placed" (1.31.141). Antonius, another interlocuter in the trialog, later comes close to reducing the classes of persuasion to political and judicial orations: "There are two primary kinds of questions, upon which eloquence turns, one general [deliberative], the other [of two] specific [judicial]. . . . For that third [panegyric] which is touched upon by Crassus, also, as I hear, Aristotle himself, who maximally illuminated these matters, adjoined [to the other two]; even though it is needed, nevertheless is less necessary" (2.10.41-43). This denigration of epideictic discourse is dutifully opposed by Quintilian, who accepts the tripartite taxonomy based on the judgment of the majority of theorists--compare the quotation from **Institutio Oratoria** 3.4.1, 12--but he continues Cicero's benign neglect by devoting most of his attention in Book 3 to forensic oratory.

The reasons Roman rhetoricians paid such scant attention to ceremonial discourse are not clear to me. Perhaps the passive role Aristotle assigns to the hearer of epideictic speeches, that of spectator (**theōros**, 'one who observes') gave the rhetor virtually no opportunity to sway audiences who held real power over citizens, thus diminishing his chances of entering and inhabiting spheres of influence in Roman society. It is easy to understand how considerations of this sort might have pushed ceremonial oratory toward the periphery of rhetorical study.

Whatever the reasons for the decline of epideictic discourse, the position it vacated was filled during the eighteenth century by a successor which boasted a context of situation as well-defined as those of political and judicial oratory. I refer, of course, to homiletical discourse. In Lecture 27 of his **Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres** (1783), Hugh Blair acknowledges that "[t]he ancients divided all orations into three kinds: the demonstrative [ceremonial], the deliberative, and the judicial." But he goes on to assert that the traditional classification is no longer viable, because one of "the three great scenes of eloquence" is new, namely, the pulpit, the eloquence of which "is altogether of a distinct nature, and cannot properly be reduced under any of the heads of the ancient rhetoricians" (99). George Campbell, in chapter 10 of **The Philosophy of Rhetoric** (1776), concurs: "The principal sorts of discourses . . . are the three following: orations delivered at the bar, those pronounced in the senate, and those spoken from the pulpit" (226).

It is important to note that despite the displacement of epideictic by homiletic rhetoric, the principle of classification used by Blair and Campbell is the same as the one enunciated by Aristotle: the nature of a kind of persuasive speaking is determined by the intended auditors of the discourse as the crucial aspect of the situational context in which the oration may be appropriately delivered. Audience and context of utterance still defined the purpose of a discourse, in part because rhetoric in the eighteenth century still took oral texts as its object of inquiry. But developments from the late

eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century shifted attention toward written texts, in the process all but dissolving the organic union between audience and situational context.

The Separation of Audience from Situational Context

The transition from spoken to written texts begins with Richard Whately, who introduces his **Elements of Rhetoric** (1828) with the following observation:

> It is evident that, in its primary signification, Rhetoric had reference to public **Speaking** alone, as its etymology [**rhema**, 'what is said'] implies. But as most of the rules for Speaking are of course equally applicable to Writing, an extension of the term naturally took place; and we find even Aristotle, the earliest systematic writer on the subject whose works have come down to us, including in his treatise rules for such compositions as were not intended to be publicly recited (279; underlining mine).

Whately's reference is perhaps disingenuous: it is to book 3 of the **Rhetoric**, concerning style, in which Aristotle devotes one paragraph in chapter 5 to ways of making writing easy to read. To infer from Aristotle's cursory comments that "most of the rules of Speaking are of course equally applicable to Writing" is hardly justified. Whately's thesis owes less to historical study than to historical circumstances. The **Elements** was intended, in part, to guide composition pedagogy: the last sections of the introduction propose criteria for compositions by grammar school students.

A second reason for the ascendancy of written texts is the influence of eighteenth-century faculty psychology on nineteenth-century theorists and textbook writers. Faculty psychologists ascribed to humans four faculties: will, emotion, imagination, and intellect. Rhetoricians deduced from the intended effect of a speech on a faculty the purpose of the speech; it was, according to Campbell's famous dictum, "to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or to influence the will." Frank D'Angelo has documented how these ends became the basis for the classification of discourse into the familiar categories of description, narration, exposition, and argumentation: description and narration were directed to the imagination, exposition to the understanding, and argumentation to the will. (Poetry, the fifth wheel, was addressed to the emotions, for instance, in Alexander Bain's system.)

As D'Angelo shows, one result of classifying discourse with reference to mental faculties was to confuse the forms--in current terminology, aims--of discourse with the modes of discourse. Another outcome, relevant to our purposes, is that psychological categories supplanted situations of utterance as the principle of division for discourse taxonomies. On the credit side, this principle made for a more comprehensive classification than Blair and Campbell had envisioned, since it readily accommodated written as well as spoken discourse as well as kinds other than persuasion. On the debit side, the coordination of aims (exposition and argumentation) with modes (description and narration) effectually severed the connection between that which defined the purpose of a speech--the

audience--and context of utterance. For appeals made to various faculties implied addressing only "men in general" rather than "men in particular," in Campbell's famous terms; and not to address persons in particular condemned situation of utterance to irrelevance.

It would be unfair to blame earlier avatars of current-traditional rhetoric alone for the demise of audience theory. A classificatory principle derived from situations of utterance could not remain viable for texts written to be read, since such texts do not have a context of utterance in the literal sense. Moreover, a canonical text of contemporary composition theory--Kinneavy's **Theory of Discourse**--ironically sanctions the dissociation we are discussing.

Kinneavy situates discourse study between linguistics on the one hand and anthropological analysis of situational and cultural context on the other (23-24). Drawing on work by cultural anthropologists such as Malinowski, Kinneavy asserts that all texts, including written ones, possess a situational context. This generalization has considerable merit in that it makes possible, in principle, a universal characterization of textuality (subject, naturally, to cultural variation). But it is crucial to note that Kinneavy's assumption departs from a fundamental tenet of classical and neoclassical rhetoric, that is, the assumption that context of situation was typologically determinative of persuasive discourse alone. For if all texts possesses a situational context, then situation is not criterial only for varieties of rhetoric, as had been assumed historically.

It is instructive to observe how associating context with all discourse adjusts Kinneavy's understanding of rhetoric. In the communication triangle, it is audience--the "decoder"--by itself, separated from particular situations, that constitutes persuasion. The abstract notion of a decoder may be necessary to construct a universal theory of discourse. But it may be rightly criticized as the basis for a theory of persuasion in that it cannot, by its nature as a context-independent construct, differentiate audiences along an axis of engagement in a rhetorical situation. In Aristotle's terms, to call an individual a decoder gives no information about whether he or she is a spectator or a judge. It is to correct this deficiency, among others, that contemporary audience theorists have therefore reunited audience and context to the extent of identifying them with each other.

The Identification of Audience and Nonsituational Context

The identification of audience and context has come about through metaphorically extending both concepts to accommodate the exigencies of reading and writing. Metaphorical extensions of audience include audience as fiction (Ong), audience evoked (Ede and Lunsford), and perhaps the notion of discourse community prominent in the literature on writing across the curriculum. In specifying audience roles for actual readers, each concept remedies the disengagement of Kinneavy's decoder.

Metaphorical extensions of situational context include the displaced contexts discussed by Douglas Park. Park argues that contexts that are created within a piece adumbrate its implied

audience; to be aware of the discursive canons of a discipline is equivalent to addressing the audience in that discipline. In this sense, audience and context become identical. Thus we come almost full circle, with audience now acting as a synecdoche for metaphorical contexts of utterance. But there is a difference. Metaphorical extensions of audience and context are no longer principles of discourse classification. Instead, they function dynamically and heuristically for readers and writers, signaling to each the steps in the dance of discourse.

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